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MANHUNT VOLUME 3, NUMBER 5, May, 1955. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of the St. John Publishing Co.), 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1955 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A.



Hold Out

BY JACK RITCHIE

The guy they kidnapped didn't have any money, but that didn't matter. The kidnappers weren't after his money . . .

FRED DROVE the car and I sat in the back with Pete Harder. "Nice stretch of country here," I said to him. "Looks pretty in the moonlight."

"You two must be strangers here if

you think you can get away with this," he said.

"Fred and me are doing fine so far."

"Why pick on me?" Harder asked.

"We stuck a pin in the phone book

and there you were." I crossed my legs and idly tapped the heel of my shoe with the barrel of the automatic.

"I got five G's in the bank. That's all I got," Harder said.

I raised an eyebrow. "That all? You must be a spender. I figured you to have more than that, considering the size of your apartment."

"Not a cent more than five thousand," Harder said again.

"We picked on a poor man, Fred," I said. We passed a big nightclub at a highway intersection. "That's another one of Mike Corrigan's places, isn't it? How many has he got altogether?"

"Enough to make him a big man in this part of the country. He'll get hot about this." Harder was about medium-sized and he had black hair and a thin mustache.

"Think you're worth fifty G's to Corrigan?" I asked.

Harder glanced at me but didn't say anything.

"Anyway I hope so," I said. "That's what we're asking."

Fred cut the speed of the car and turned into a gravel side road.

"He's got until noon tomorrow to get it together. It's rushing things, I admit, but Fred and I like to operate fast."

Fred turned into the driveway to the small two room cabin and parked the car in front of it.

I turned on the flashlight and got out. "Be careful where you step, Harder. It's muddy right here."

We went into the cabin and I kept the flash on until Fred lit the kerosene lantern. I indicated a chair with the gun. "Take a seat, Harder."

"Suppose Corrigan doesn't raise the money by noon?" Harder asked.

"You wouldn't like to think about it," I said.

"If you two got any brains you'll let me go right now."

"Sure," I said. "We shake hands and forget this ever happened. That's right, isn't it?"

Fred rummaged through the cupboard. "Pork and beans okay?"

"Fine," I said. "You hungry, Harder?"

He shook his head. I went to the corner and picked up the rope.

"You don't have to tie me," Harder said.

"We don't have to, but we want to. Put your hands behind your back." I tied his hands and wrapped another coil around his legs. "Can't have you walking away," I said.

"How do you know I'm worth fifty grand to Corrigan?"

"It's a risk we'll take. You're his right hand man. We heard talk about how buddy-like you two are."

Fred heated the pork and beans and poured them on two plates.

"At first Fred and I figured on sending the note to Elsie Thomas working on the idea that you mean more to her than you do to Corrigan. But then we weren't sure she could raise the money. Probably have to go to Corrigan anyway. So we just cut out the middleman, so to speak."

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"I don't care much for blondes myself," Fred said. "Pass the bread, will you, Ed?"

"Why not settle for the five thousand," Harder said. "If you get Mike mad he'll come for you."

I nodded. "That thought sends shivers down our backs. I understand Corrigan's a shiv man when he's irritated. Got a silver switch knife with a blade that gleams like all get out."

"Elsie could pawn her jewels," Harder said. "You'd get maybe five grand more."

"Take too long," Fred said. "We get fidgety."

Harder was quiet while we finished eating, but he was thinking. He didn't like to bring up what was on his mind, but still he wanted to be reassured.

He licked his lips. "When you get the fifty grand, you let me go?"

"Fred and I are thinking about it," I said. "Be happy you're alive now."

Harder didn't have much to say after that and around eleven Fred and I carried him into the bedroom and put him on the cot so that he could get some sleep if he wanted it.

Fred and I took turns sitting up with him during the night and at eight in the morning Fred made breakfast. Harder didn't want anything to eat, but I untied him so that he could have a cup of coffee.

I lit a cigarette after we were through and went to the window. "Looks like rain," I said.

"Hope not," Fred said. "The windshield wiper's giving me trouble."

"What time is it?" Harder asked.

"About eight-thirty," I said. I took Harder back into the bedroom and retied him.

He sat on the edge of the cot. "How are you going to get the money?"

"Fred and I find that the simple ways are the best. At twelve noon, Corrigan or somebody he knows tosses the satchel of dough out of his car right where that sign marks the county line. Fred will drive by and if everything looks okay, he'll pick it up."

Harder's forehead was damp. "What if nobody shows up?"

"Don't think about it," I said. "Try to relax."

Fred read comic books and I played solitaire until about eleven-thirty. "It's time to go now, Fred," I said.

He got into his coat. "It's beginning to drizzle."

While he was gone, I took my gun apart and went over it with a rag. I smiled to myself. "You know," I said. "I've just been thinking. If you and Corrigan aren't good friends like it looks, this would be a nice time for him to get rid of you."

"He wouldn't do that," Harder said.

"You know him better than I do."

"We've been together for ten years."

"That right? Partners?"

"No," Harder said. "He's the boss."

"Must be an interesting life." I began putting the automatic back together. "This Elsie is quite a looker. Caught her act a couple of nights back. Not much voice, but that's not what she's selling."

Every ten minutes or so, Harder asked for the time. About twelve-thirty we heard the car pulling up in front of the cabin and Harder turned his head toward the door to the kitchen and waited.

Fred came in and shook some of the mist from his hat. Harder's eyes searched his face.

"Did you get the satchel, Fred?" I asked.

"Nobody showed up."

"You must have missed it," Harder said. "It's probably in the ditch."

Fred sat down. "Nope. I checked."

I looked at Harder. "I guess Corrigan doesn't miss you like you thought."

"He needs more time to raise the money," Harder said.

"Fred and I think he just doesn't want to."

Sweat trickled down Harder's face as Fred and I stood looking down at him. His eyes went from my face to Fred's and back again and

the terror shine was coming into them.

I picked my automatic off the table and pressed off the safety.

Harder almost screamed. "Wait! You'll get the money."

"No," I said. "If Corrigan wanted to pay, he would have."

Harder's voice was high. "I've got the dough. There's almost a hundred grand. You can have it all."

Fred and I looked at each other. "I don't know," Fred said. "I'd say he's stalling."

"I'm not stalling," he said desperately. "Elsie's got the money in the safe at her apartment. It's mine. I've been getting it together for the last couple of years."

Fred eyed me. "That's it," he said.

I put the automatic in my pocket and went into the kitchen. Corrigan was standing behind the open door.

"You heard?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I guess you were right at that. He's been getting away with two or three grand a week. Do you want Fred and me to finish it?"

"No," Corrigan said. "I'll take it from here." His hand came out of his coat pocket with the switch knife.

Corrigan went into the bedroom and he made it last ten minutes.

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